General Audiences

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Gen

Project Hail Mary - Andy Weir
Project Hail Mary (2026)

Ryland Grace & Rocky

Ryland Grace
Rocky (Project Hail Mary)

Tattoos
Scars
Platonic Cuddling
Platonic Soulmates
Ryland Grace & Rocky are Best Friends
Ryland Grace and Rocky are Platonic Soulmates
Fluff and Humor

and I think it's gonna be a long, long time

Likelightinglass

Summary:

Grace and Rocky discuss tattoos, markings, and scars.

Notes:

Thank you so much to everyone who has left such lovely comments on this series. I hope you enjoy the newest installment!

(See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one (#children).)

I'm bored out of my mind, so I've taken to climbing into every storage compartment and unscrewing every panel on this ship to find something to entertain myself with.

Rocky has been annoyed with me for making this ship even messier than usual, so he has retreated into one of the quieter corners of his area of the ship where he can pretend he doesn't hear me ripping the inside of this place apart.

Why couldn't Stratt have thrown a couple of Lego sets or something in here? A few puzzles. The don't go crazy room is great but I'm really not in the mood to look at Earth landscapes and cry today. I already did that yesterday. I mean I know this was originally a suicide mission but what if we had solved the whole astrophage thing in like a month? Were the astronauts just supposed to immediately kill themselves the next day? What if we had met an alien orbiting Tau Ceti and were letting him hitchhike with us to his home planet and it was a super boring trip? Come on, Miss World Dictator, I thought you planned for every contingency.

Success! Maybe? I've found a box stuffed in a corner of a compartment near the lab and it's full of…little tubes of something? It can't be anything they thought would be that vital or it would be with all the rest of the important equipment, this was shoved in some empty space like an afterthought. I look at the labels, and– huh. It looks like inks and paints? I guess that could be scientifically useful. And potentially fun, which is what I'm looking for. There's some bags of powder–

I immediately grab everything and rustle through the box to look for anything marked “food grade” and double success!!! There’s food dye!

It has zero nutritional value, but I have five different colors. If I add a few drops of green to my taumoeba/coma slurry smoothie, I can use the power of my (stretched to its limit) imagination to pretend it's a McDonald’s Shamrock Shake. What a great day this is turning out to be. Hey, I gotta take some little wins every day or my sanity is going to slip through my fingers.

I put the food dye to the side. I am going to have a lot of fun pretending with those. Endless possibilities of colorful drinks. As I take stock of what else is in the mystery box, I find an interesting little kit among my new treasures. It even comes with instructions. No idea why they thought this would come in handy, but hey, I’m not complaining.

“Hey, Rocky!” I shout. I know he can hear me perfectly well if I whisper, but sometimes it's fun to scream at the top of my lungs. “Want to give me a temporary tattoo?”

He doesn't immediately drop whatever he’s doing and come pay attention to me,
I assume because he’s decided to be a terrible friend, so I grab a couple of supplies and go looking, shouting his name all the way. I find him parked in his little corner.

“Grace is dying, question?” he says, with no sense of urgency, fiddling with something that looks complicated, since it’s using three of his hands. *“Grace needs urgent assistance from Rocky or ship will explode, question?”*

I ignore his sass. “I found a henna tattoo kit! Want to draw on me?”

“No understand fourth and fifth words.”

“It’s like an Earth…decoration thing. It’s cultural, but I don’t have any upcoming weddings I’m participating in, so it’ll have to be just for fun. You put a paste on your skin in designs, so you could see the surfaces. And then after it dries and comes off the skin under it is stained for a couple weeks.”

“This cause damage to skin, question? Human skin very delicate.”

“Nope, no damage. Just be fun to do and make pretty designs.”

“Fine, we can do. Later.”

“Why not now?” I ask, dragging out the last word with a whine.

“Rocky is busy with–” he says something I don’t recognize, presumably the name of the device in his hands. *“And Grace is too busy now because Grace is cleaning the ship.”*

“I’m not cleaning the ship.”

“Yes, you are,” he says, with a wave goodbye.

Ugh. “Fine. Grace clean ship now. Then Grace has a Shamrock Shake for lunch.”

“No under–” he starts, then seems to think better of it. *“No need to understand words. Will talk later.”*

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Ok, the lab is cleaned up. Most of all my crap that was on the floor is put away and I’d say half of the things I’ve torn apart are put back together now. That’s going to have to be enough for now, I’m tired.

My green “milkshake” was pretty decent. If I tried really hard I could almost taste the memory of mint. It was fun to look at though. I should add more colors around here. My new treasure box should help with that. I’ll put that on a future schedule to look forward to.

I’ve given him plenty of time to finish whatever he was doing, so now I’m looking up henna designs on the laptop, sitting by the xenonite barrier impatiently. I guess I’ll start with my arms and hands. We have a few of these little tubes of the paste, a tip on each like an icing container for cake decorating. I’m not sure what they did to these to make them not expired by now, but it doesn’t really matter. The consistency looks like it's probably supposed to, and I did a test dot like the instructions said and my skin didn’t fall off so I’m guessing it’s fine.

“Is it later yet?” I shout across the ship.

“Ten minutes,” I hear from the next room.

Eh, I can wait ten minutes I guess. I’ll try and do some on my left arm, since I’m right handed and then I’ll make Rocky do some drawings on my right. I don’t know if i can manage all the lines and designs I find on the laptop, but it’ll be fun to just use my skin like a coloring book and get to keep the reminders for a while.

I sit up, cross legged on the ground with a board on my lap so it's steady and even, and lay my arm down, inner side up where it's smooth and mostly hairless, and begin doodling little swirls on my palms, trying to get the hang on the flow. Before moving down towards my arm.

I am not great at this, but I outline a little sun, a circle with lines for rays all around it like in a little kid’s drawing, and then a lopsided flower. I draw a smiley face on my wrist. It’s silly but it makes me happy.

After a few minutes, he does come over and I explain the concept to him. “And look, it’s raised surfaces so you can hear them!”

He makes a little laugh. *“Artwork looks like made by child.”*

“Ha ha. Well you’ll draw on my other arm and we can compare.” I lightly push him through the xenonite. Well, pretend like I can push him. It’s just a weak tap but he’ll get the point. He watches as I explain what I’m doing and some different “Earth symbols” as I outline them, like a heart and a five pointed star.

I outline a blocky little carapace and five spindly arms coming out. “It’s you!” I say, showing him.

“Look nothing like Rocky.”

Even though he does not actually have a face, I draw a little frowny face with angry eyebrows in the open space of the carapace outline to artistically represent his annoyance with me. “Now it’s you.” I say.

He sticks a finger through the barrier and uses it to smear the face, filling it in brown. “Hey!”

“Rocky not want angry face on Grace skin. This supposed to make you happy, not sad.”

I smile, and use a washcloth to wipe off the henna from the barrier. “I am happy.”

“Okay, I’m running out of room here,” I say, after squeezing a slightly misshapen fox near my elbow. “Let’s switch.”

I hand over the tube of henna paste to Rocky, who can grasp it through the xenonite membrane that stretches around his claw. I keep my left arm open and sticking out so it can dry without smearing and position the right upturned on the board and in front of Rocky. He, too, starts with a few test swirls to match mine to get a feel of how to start. Then he uses another claw on my forearm, to help trace an outline, but he scratches in a quick and irregular sort of way, and - oh, no.

I start laughing, trying to stay still. I can’t stop the quick huffs of laughter, and the shimmy of trying not to pull my arm away, and he stops, very concerned. *“Rocky hurting Grace, question!?”*

“No, no,” I say, quickly. “You’re–,” I can’t help but laugh again at the absurdity of it. “You are *tickling* me.” I have the after effects of that weirdly fun sort of itchy sensation. I can’t remember the last time I felt that.

“Meaning what, question?”

“It’s a, uh, physical sensation,” scientist brain taking over to explain. “Human skin is weird. You tickle someone by touching parts of their skin in a way that’s intentionally lightly irritating, and it triggers a laughter response. You have to do higher pressure touches or else it’s just annoying, but the laughter inducing kind of creates a feedback loop where you find it pleasant and funny, which makes you laugh more.”

“Why this not happen when you do same sensation on your other arm?”

“You can’t tickle yourself,” I say. “Your brain knows where your own touch is going to be, and part of the laughter trigger is the sensation being random and unexpected. But it’s fun, and somehow feels nice but also annoying. Kids do it to each other a lot, or parents and children…I probably sound crazy, it’s not something Eridians can feel, right?” Man it would be hilarious to tickle him. But alas, no skin.

“It sounds very similar to Eridian–”, he cuts himself off so suddenly that all my attention lasers in on him. *“There is nothing like this on Erid, no.”*

“Ohhhh, you are a liar,” I say. He’s being so cagey. “There is. There definitely is, what is it?”

“Does Grace want to continue with drawing? Will touch in different, more expected way,” he says, pretending like I can’t see right through him.

“You have to tell me if there’s a way to tickle you. Either tell me now or I am going to ask about it ten times a day for the next three years.”

He considers this for a moment before he accepts that I’m telling the truth, vocalizing with his sigh sound.

“When young Eridians learning to speak, make many random noises. High octave, low octave, all different frequencies in random pattern. Feels funny and cute to hear. Sometimes, intentionally do this unexpectedly to friends and mates, get sensation of many different sound waves, different patterns. Like you say– is irritating in a funny way. Makes laugh.”

Ha! Oh wow, that is very neat, biologically speaking. The auditory equivalent of a touch sensation. Makes sense.

I immediately have to give it a try. I just start singing up and down, jumping through every frequency my human vocal cords can manage. Until he starts to laugh.

“Did that work?” I ask, excitedly.

“No. Laughing because you sound very stupid.”

Boo. “I’m going to figure it out though,” I threaten. I’m planning to just randomly attack him with crazy sound wave patterns until I accomplish Eridian tickling.

He sighs again. *“Yes. You probably will.”*

“Alright back to drawing. Make some pretty designs.” I move my arm into position. He is more deliberate in how he touches me now, probably trying to make me forget about the concept of tickling. Human memory isn’t that bad, and now I have a new goal to stay entertained.

He takes my hand in one of his, using it to hold my arm steady, but I clasp back with some pressure, and a light squeeze. He squeezes back, very gently so it doesn’t crush all of my bones. It feels nice.

He is making much more artistic designs than I did, mostly random looking patterns.

“You can draw something fun too,” I say. “Shapes or things you like. Or people get meaningful tattoos- names, dates, something personal, whatever. It’s temporary anyway, so even if you mess up this is still fun.” I am really enjoying it, it feels comfortable, getting drawn on while holding his hand.

He hesitates, then writes something in Eridianese. And a little swoopy symbol. Then numbers.

He’s strangely quiet. I recognize the numbers, and I’m working out trying to convert from base six, when he stops, hesitating like he might try to swipe it off.

I move my arm away, just a little, as if protecting its place on my skin. It’s something important, I can tell. “What’s it mean?”

“Possibly too personal. Apology. This fade in a week or two, correct, question?”

“I don’t know, buddy, I think we’re close enough at this point there's not much that’s “too personal” between us.”

He points to the written Eridianese. *“This is Grace name.”*

Oh, cool. I study it. I’ll probably have to learn to write it myself one of these days, so I can sign all those autographs when I’m a big hero on Erid. Hey, I can dream. “And what are the numbers?”

His voice is lower, hesitant. *“Eridian days from Blip-A’s arrival at Tau Ceti. Until day make contact with Hail Mary.”*

My heart jumps. “But that’s how long you were there alone,” I say. “Thought you didn’t want to make me sad?” I lean up against him through the barrier, pressing my shoulder to his carapace, and he presses firmly back, a hug without arms.

“Yes, alone. Sad. But easier to think of and remember now. Now I know I was not hopeless or lost for all that time. Rocky was just waiting for Grace to find him.”

And here I thought I wasn’t going to cry today! My reflex is to say something self-depracating, like sorry it was just me and not someone better, or get leaky and sad about how long he was out there all alone, and make him think he has to comfort *me*. But that would make me a pretty crappy friend.

“I’m so happy we found each other,” I say, and turn my head. I’m right up against him, the thin barrier between us, and I press my lips on the top of his carapace without thinking.

He tilts. *“What kind of touch is this, question?”*

“Oh, I didn't really mean to– it’s a kiss. On your forehead. If you had one.” I laugh weakly and press my fingers to the center of my own, trying to demonstrate the intended location. “Affectionate gesture,” I say with a shrug.

He lifts his arm out and presses the tips of his fingers to the center of my forehead, gently tapping. *“Affectionate gesture return,”* he says.

I smile. “Thanks, bud.”

I put my arm in front of him again. “So what’s that symbol? Is it a word?”

“No. Means a concept. How to describe...idea that strange things happen for big purpose. Significant alignment that will always happen even if unexpected.”

“Like fate,” I say. “Human idea that some things are destined. Like, for example, if two people from different solar systems meet out in space, they were meant to be.”

“Yes,” he says. *“Fate,”* he speaks in Eridian and I mentally log it. I can tell he still thinks he might have overstepped somehow.

“Hey,” I say with a smile. “I think so too.”

He continues to draw, it tickles a little but not as much as on my wrist. He stops again when he reaches my scar, three claws burned into the skin below my elbow.

“I should cover this, question? Sad sad sad Rocky hurt and damage Grace. Can draw something more pretty on top.”

“No way,” I say. I never want that covered. “Outline it. Trust me, Rocky, that’s the prettiest thing about me. You saved me.”

“Grace save Rocky first,” he says, and gently outlines around the claw mark.

At that, he’s mostly run out of space, so drawing time has come to a close.

“This looks great, Rock,” I say, admiring my arms. Well one arm looks significantly more polished and cohesive than the other, but both make me happy. “I’ve got to let it sit for a few hours to dry, and then the surface part comes off and you won’t be able to see it without your camera.”

“You should make mark on me,” he says suddenly. *“Only fair.”*

“Like your carvings?” I say. I’ve seen most of them before, he's got a family crest on two arms, a mating gem that matches Adrian, a few others he's explained the meaning of, like his rank on his ship and mission patch. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to manage that. Unless you just want me to draw something on top that’ll fade, like the henna?”

“I make carving myself, have tool. Just need Grace help. Reminder of Grace should be on my arm too,” he says, gesturing to the scar.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “It just seems so…permanant. It’s not like the henna. Are you sure you want a reminder of me on you forever?”

I didn't think that musical chords and whale song sounds could ever be described as *deadpan*, but that is the tone he gives me in response.

"Oh, yes," he says. *"Otherwise Grace would be so easy to forget. Grace only makes science to save two stars and billions of lives. Only save Rocky from dying alone in space. Then save Rocky from dying alone in space SECOND TIME. Such small things, no reason to remember."*

I laugh at the way his carapace tilts to the side in snide disbelief. *"Sarcasm",* he adds helpfully, as if my tiny brain couldn't parse it.

"Alright, alright. You've made your point. You sure you can do it on yourself though?" I say doubtfully. You said someone else always gives markings."

He's quiet for a few moments, then rotates around, close to the clear barrier.

"This I did myself, after-" he pauses, his low octave tells me he's emotional. *"After,"* he finishes, simply. He moves the side of his arm so I can see neat, lined up dots, a couple centimeters wide each.

I count them, but I don't need to. I know there's twenty two. One for each of his crew. I press my hand to the wall and tap in silent acknowledgement. He taps back.

"Okay," I say. "So what kind of marking?"

He puts a finger up and retreats to look through his toolbags, and comes back a couple minutes later with a few items. He moves back to the flexible membrane.*"Same as I made on you. Put hand on arm,"* he says, displaying the outside of the arm to the right of the one with Adrian's gem. I tentatively put my hand through and lay my palm against his lower arm, similar to where my scar is located, splaying my fingers slightly. I am *not* going to cry. Well. Maybe just a little.

He takes something that looks like a very sharp pen and starts to dig an outline around my hand. I keep as still as possible as it scratches slightly along the rock, leaving an indentation. Once he's done, I withdraw my hand, already missing the warmth of the membrane.

As he uses a tool that looks like a mix between a drill and a sandblaster (I can't help but wince, but he shows no visible signs of any pain) to carve deeper, until there's a large human hand forever intended into his arm.

Okay, I'm crying now. There was really no getting around it.

"It looks great, Rocky. Like I'm really touching you," I say, more wistfully than I intended.

He takes my hand through the membrane and I just sort of cuddle up against him, doing my best not to smudge any of the mostly dry henna on my arms.

"Hey," I say, realizing I maybe should have brought this up beforehand, "is um, Adrian going to mind? That you've got a marking from another person on you? It's kind of…significant."

"Is significant. Carving is very normal for any significant relationship. Family, mate, crew. Friend. Adrian will likely agree alien from other star system who save me and also entire planet might have some small significance."

"Oh yeah, so just like any old pal, then. Cool," I say, laughing.

We sit in silence for a bit. I look at his designs on me, the symbol for fate, the outline of his hand.

"I hope Adrian likes me," I say. I am honestly pretty nervous about it. I don't know if I can expect them to be too happy that their spouse brought a sickly stray alien home that he picked up on the side of the space road, fated meeting or not.

"Adrian will love Grace," Rocky says simply.

I wait for him to elaborate. He does not. "...And how can you be so sure?"

"Adrian love Rocky, and Rocky love Grace. So Adrian love Grace. Mathematical transitive property."

"Oh, well," I say with a laugh. "If it's mathematical, it must be true."

Series this work belongs to:

- ← Previous Work (http://archiveofourown.org/works/82340846) Part 5 of Platonic cuddling (http://archiveofourown.org/series/5891781) Next Work → (http://archiveofourown.org/works/85586171)

Works inspired by this one:

- [Podfic] and I think it's gonna be a long, long time (https://archiveofourown.org/works/83785936) by Flowerparrish Pods (Flowerparrish) (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Flowerparrish/pseuds/Flowerparrish%20Pods)

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